

the equivalent of a worksheet. My friend and mentor Don Graves confirms what I already know, that more kids are writing but that the writing isn't getting any better: "I'm still very concerned about how little writing is taught, how little time is provided for children to write. And when time is provided, I don't see children challenged by teachers who have been prepared to teach it through the teacher's own high level of literacy" (Routman 1995, 524).

The comments of a student new to our district make some of the problems with teaching writing crystal clear. In mid-November, Andrew entered Danny Young's third-grade class, where he enthusiastically participated in writing workshop for one hour each day. Writing workshop began with a minilesson presented by Danny, continued with a period of sustained writing that sometimes included peer or teacher conferences, and concluded with whole-group sharing (a public, classwide conference). I was working weekly with Danny, supporting his efforts. When Danny told me Andrew was always saying that writing was different and better at this school, I wanted to learn more:

REGIE: Andrew, I work with a lot of teachers in writing, and I got especially interested in you when Mr. Young told me that you were asking to stay in at recess to do your writing, which is pretty unusual and pretty wonderful. Tell me why you like the writing program here better. Tell me what it was like at your other school and what the difference is here.

ANDREW: At my old school, they would just let you publish any little thing you wanted. You wouldn't have to rewrite very good and you wouldn't have to be serious with conferences. [The teachers] would just go to the publishing center and sign you up and just let you publish. It wasn't serious.

REGIE: And why do you think that's not a good idea?

ANDREW: Because a couple of people published maybe thirteen books, but when you read them, you're thinking, *This is really, really dull. They should have worked on it more.*

REGIE: Andrew, I was particularly interested when you talked with Mr. Young and me in class today, and you said you had published five books from September to November and you realized they weren't very good.

ANDREW: They weren't, but the teachers kept complimenting you, just to make you work harder, but it didn't work. And you realized, *Hey, I can't do this. These aren't good books.*

REGIE: You said that at the other school there was a big list of things you were supposed to do. Tell me about that.

ANDREW: Oh, yeah. First, we had a list, and it said you have to write your story and then go back and put periods in and all that. And then you would have to get a friend and just have a conference. But the conferences weren't serious. After the conference, you would go back and do what they had you work on, but that didn't do much. Then you would have a conference with the teacher and then rewrite.

REGIE: Um-hmm.

ANDREW: And then, even though the writing wasn't good enough, they would publish it, 'cause they had a conference with you. Once the publishing people said, *Gosh, you should have worked harder on this.* I think they knew.

REGIE: Okay. And since you've been here, you've published one book, and you told me it's pretty good. Tell me about that, what you're working on now.

ANDREW: I published about my hockey experiences, and now I'm writing about my life and my hobbies.

REGIE: You seem very interested in making sure that your writing is well done. So what are you doing, or what's happening in your class to make your writing better?

ANDREW: Well, when I have a conference with you or Mr. Young, it's more serious than at my other school. Like I'm expected to have reread my writing carefully and filled out a form saying what I need. And then, at the conference I learn things, like cutting and pasting.

REGIE: Andrew, you told me that at your other school you got to choose your own writing topics. So that part's not really different. The part that's different, if I'm hearing you correctly, is that here the writing is taken more seriously.

ANDREW: Yeah.

REGIE: Over there, it was just like, take out your book and write.

ANDREW: Uh-huh, it didn't really matter what you wrote. You could even publish in a day.

REGIE: Well, sometimes you can write something short that's really excellent, but these weren't?

ANDREW: They weren't, 'cause they . . . they just weren't.

REGIE: You know, Andrew, a lot of people think that kids just want to get the stuff down and get done with it. But you're saying that's not true. You're saying you feel really good when you do quality work.

ANDREW: Yeah, you should try to take up all your time to do as much as you can and do your best.

Out of the mouths of babes. What's gone wrong? A tough question with no easy answers. However, certain factors appear to contribute strongly to the lack of quality writing in classrooms.

Lacking Knowledge

The truth is, most of us know very little about how to teach writing. To become certified as an elementary teacher in most states, courses in writing are still not required. In fact, many universities have few or no course offerings in writing (Routman 1995, 525). Furthermore, many of us fear and dislike writing ourselves. We remember writing to meet our teachers' values and purposes, we remember the red marks on our papers, some of us even remember writing as punishment.

Still, with the best of intentions, we forged ahead. Many of us read about writing process classrooms and established "writing workshops." We followed a formula without understanding the recursive, idiosyncratic nature of writing. We didn't know that we could not teach writing (or any subject) well unless we ourselves were knowledgeable and highly literate as readers and writers. We didn't realize that we could value, observe, and use our own writing processes to become better writing teachers.

Almost all the changes I have made in how I teach writing stem from trusting what

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